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ABSTRACT

Issues surrounding the testing and evaluation of speaking in Singapore secondary schools are examined, including the questions of what skills and knowledge a speech evaluator should possess and what model of spoken knowledge--Received Pronunciation (RP) or Singapore English--should be provided. Oral tests, developed for the English language section of the Functional Objectives of Language Learning (FOLL) project by the Institute of Education in Singapore to determine the extent to which students achieve the functional objectives of syllabuses, are also surveyed. Finally, an evaluation study of the opinions and attitudes of some Singapore teachers and pupils towards the teaching and learning of spoken English is briefly summarized. It is concluded that the evaluation of speaking in secondary schools is clearly linked with the evaluation and valuing of spoken language by all teachers and by the school system itself. Techniques for evaluating speaking skills are developing, but there is a great need for administrators to acknowledge the complexity and importance of these skills both for teachers and for pupils. (JL)

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TESTING AND EVALUATING SPEAKING AT SECONDARY LEVEL

A Paper delivered at the RELC Conference 1990, by Pauline Steele, Lecturer at the Institute of Education, Singapore.

This paper looks at some issues surrounding the testing and evaluating of speaking in the secondary school, and goes on to survey briefly some oral tests developed for the English language section of the FOLL project (Functional Objectives of Language Learning), which was undertaken by the Institute of Education in Singapore four years ago in order to determine the extent to which pupils are achieving the functional objectives of the syllabuses. It will go on to look at ways in which these tests and others have been adapted and developed in the pre-service course in teaching English language in Singapore secondary schools for diagnostic and formative evaluation of pupils' speaking ability in the classroom situation.

The final part of the paper briefly summarises an evaluation study done on the opinions and attitudes of some Singapore teachers and pupils towards the teaching and learning of spoken English.

The primacy of oral language, and the importance of pupil talk in learning have long been recognised by linguists and educationists as a result of the communicative approach, and studies on classroom interaction,(Barnes, 1976; Vigotsky, 1962; Cazden, 1987). At its height, enthusiasts for the communicative approach were advocating a classroom where pupils were encouraged to talk, talk, talk, but there was little or no structure, and frequently no provision for monitoring, giving

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feedback or evaluating this talk.

Talk is mostly justified in syllabuses as being a helpful adjunct to reading comprehension or writing, an instrument for practising grammar items, or exploring content and topic rather than a major component of the course in its own right, and this is reflected in the examination and assessment systems. There is generally no specific teaching time allocated, and any direct or indirect teaching or learning of speaking has to be fitted in or integrated with the other skills. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but in some research I conducted several years ago both teachers and pupils reported that time for oral work was a difficulty, and that oral work often has to be skimped in favour of the 'more important examination skills'. This question of time is also often raised as a criticism of the methods advocated for improving spoken language.

Yet, if we are to take seriously the claim made by Wilkinson over twenty years ago when he wrote (1967):

'The quality of a man's life is determined primarily by his human relationships from the moment he is born, and these relationships are established and maintained through speech.'

then it is really a matter of priorities and values, or even willingness to empower pupils, since the power to establish, maintain, or even control one's relationships both personal or in the workplace, is a very crucial language skill indeed.

Again, testing and evaluation, as we all know lie at the heart of the education system, but, to what extent is speaking actually taught and pupil progress monitored? Is it practicable or feasible for oral/aural skills to be emphasized and valued

more in general secondary education? What are the issues and problems surrounding this?

Finally, can oral work be made more focussed and rigorous by means of more effective diagnostic and formative evaluation methods? What objectives do teachers and pupils agree on as important, what methods are effective, and what aspects of speaking can we teach and test?

ISSUES IN EVALUATION

WHAT DO WE LOOK FOR IN AN EVALUATOR OF SPEECH?

In most respects, a competent evaluator needs the same qualities skills and knowledge which we look for in a teacher, but sharpened and honed to a high level of proficiency. The evaluator is the teacher par excellence, who knows precisely what she is doing, why it is being done, how it can best be achieved, and by applying the skills of diagnostic and formative evaluation how to monitor and guide the process of pupil progress towards the objectives set, giving effective feedback along the way.

The specific tools of the speech evaluator are:

1. A good command of spoken English. O'Brien (1986)in his profile of the qualities which experienced language teachers and MOE inspectors consider important, put this high on the list.
2. An understanding of the complexities of the communication process.
3. Detailed knowledge of the syllabus and how to go about teachng and testing it.
4 Experience of the registers and the socio-linguistic behaviours involved in the type of discourse being taught. (Bygate 1987)

5. Ability to analyse oral discourse. (Sinclair 1982)
This involves highly developed listening skills, including:
i Ability to use a phonetic script and other appropriate symbols to detail or diagnose surface features such as pronunciation, intonation, speech rhythm and the whole range of prosodic features.
ii Appreciation of the structure, organisation and diction of spoken discourse. In other words, an evaluator needs the ability to analyse what people say, and precisely how they say it in relation to the purpose, situation and audience.

6. Ability to set up interactive, communicative tasks to test the objectives being taught. (Candlin 1987, Malamah-Thomas 1987, Nolasco & Arthur, 1987)

The first major question arising from this, concerns the linguistic knowledge and competency of the teachers doing the evaluation. No doubt the Singaporean population of teachers share a similar linguistic and academic background to that of the student teachers we train, and this is very varied. The English Proficiency Test in spoken English, taken by students on entry reveals widely varying levels of competence, since for many it is a second language, whereas others belong to groups in the community who use English as a first language. Studies are currently being undertaken on the EPT, and the effectiveness of the oral communication course in improving the spoken English of teacher trainees, but certainly this must be a key factor if oral testing and evaluation are to become a serious and significant part of the secondary school programme. So far as knowledge of

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spoken language goes, it is important that this extends beyond a theoretical knowledge of phonetics, into practical skills in speech performance and teaching.

WHAT SORT OF MODEL?

Another key issue relating to the teaching of speech concerns the sort of model which the Singaporean teacher should provide and teach to pupils. There is a large and growing demand for good spoken English in the workforce, but at the same time considerable resistance to the imposition of RP as a model, among many who regard the use of Singaporean varieties of English as a sign of nationhood and solidarity.

Dr Catherine Lim, claims in her PhD thesis (1986) that official endorsement of RP and disparagement of Singapore English has led to a lack of confidence in Singaporean self expression. This may have more to do with the way speaking is taught, or has been taught, since the current methodology tends to consist mainly of public error correction rather than a process leading to self expression and confidence building.

Professor Mary Tay of the National University of Singapore also contends that 'In the Singapore context, it is neither feasible nor desirable to teach a variety of English that is indistinguishable from Standard British English. When we consider writing we can and should consider such a standard.' Of course this whole question of regional accents has long ago been settled in other English speaking countries. Everyone from the BBC to the various overseas examining boards accepts local varieties of English. The pronunciation and diction of Singaporeans neither could, nor should be standardised, but Catherine Lim gets closer

to the heart of the matter when she goes on to mention functional and dysfunctional varieties of spoken English. It is these considerations of register and appropriacy which provide the most acceptable guide and arbiter for evaluating both writing and speaking in the classroom. The secondary language course will have to develop student awareness, knowledge and competence across the whole range of social, academic, official and technical registers if it is to succeed in the aims set for the English language by the Prime Minister. 'English provides a neutral instrument that all races can use with no unfair bias. Without the continued use of English, Singapore would not have secured a new base for her economy, and brought up to date her role in the international and regional economy.'

The scholarly infrastructure of Singaporean dictionaries, grammars and language studies has not yet been built up, and the spoken language is still in a state of change,as the older generations of Chinese educated Singaporeans give way to the new bilingual generation who have been educated in English. It will obviously take time before the language situation settles down, because the future of English in Singapore depends partly on the skills and competencies of the people speaking it, and partly on the political climate of opinion regarding its use.

The language of the secondary classroom is after all mainly transactional, and the register which students find most difficult to handle appropriately is the formal or semi-formal one, so, for academic and official purposes it seems sensible to go along with the Ministry of Education directive that the model to be taught in Singapore schools is RP, though of course in the

words of John Honey(1988), the model offered will doubtless be a paralect of RP with marked Singaporean features approximating what will doubtless become Standard Educated Singaporean English. Catherine Lim makes a useful distinction between model and goal, by putting forward the idea that RP can provide one of the models for spoken English, without necessarily becoming a goal for all Singaporean speakers of English. In teaching and testing speech, a clear distinction needs to be made between accent and pronunciation.

WHAT TO TEACH IN LARGE CLASSES

Yet even if agreement is reached on teacher competencies, and desirable models and goals, issues concerning the feasibility of teaching speaking skills in both native speaking and second language environments still remain. These reservations focus partly on the lingering bad reputation of old-style speech training, but also on problems of monitoring and evaluating large classes.

Decisions on what to teach must be settled before decisions on how to evaluate it are taken. There have been few fully worked out models of classroom methodology even for native speaking environments. "Why don't the English teach their children how to speak?" lamented that most famous of speech teachers, Professor Higgins. He had no doubts about the value of his work, his objectives or his methodology, but controversy still rages among linguists about his basic assumptions. Should the secondary teacher concentrate mainly on phonology with some corrective grammar thrown in? Even Professor Higgins had to

revise his curriculum after that first disastrous test at Mrs. Higgins' teaparty, when he was forced to introduce notions of appropriacy and register into his curriculum. Secondary pupils have a need to practise registers beyond that of informal conversation in order to function adequately in a modern urban society.

Yet the English have finally decided to teach their children how to speak. Through the efforts of the English Speech Board, a syllabus has been developed which is largely task-based and functional in its approach, and they have led the way to the rest of the English speaking world by introducing a compulsory oral examination at GCE level which involves a range of authentic and interactive oral tasks and group presentations which are internally assessed and moderated by teachers. This reflects the increasing significance of oracy in the education system.

Oracy is a concept far broader than Professor Higgins' because it recognises the interactive nature of spoken language, as well as its phonological and discourse aspects. Wilkinson defines it as 'The ability to use and appreciate the oral skills of speaking and listening' Just as the teaching of reading can no longer be confined to drilling the ABC, the teaching of speech can no longer begin and end with phonology. Decisions on objectives, methods and evaluation to be adopted in teaching speaking skills must necessarily be influenced by the methodologies being currently advocated and adopted by educationists in other subject and skill areas, especially since methods of testing and teaching speech are relatively undeveloped and unresearched compared to other areas of the

language curriculum.

Two steps in this area have been taken during my time at the Institute of Education. One was the inclusion of speaking skills in the Foll project. This project, headed by Dr Ho Wah Kam and Dr Oliver Seet, was aimed at studying the extent to which the functional objectives of the current language syllabuses are being achieved at PSLE level, S4N and S4E.

During the four phases pupils at all three levels have been tested in their ability to take part in a conversation or interview with an adult, their ability to ask questions of their peers in an information gap activity, ability to give instructions to a fellow pupil, and ability to read aloud and take part in a group discussion. The tapes from these tests have yielded fascinating data on the current abilities of Singaporean pupils to communicate in English.

This data has also formed the basis for a new set of lectures on teaching speaking skills in the secondary methods course.Students in this course gain experience in gauging the levels of pupils' communicative competence by listening to them as they perform speaking tasks and noting particular elements of discourse such as pronunciation and prosodic features, grammar, fluency, appropriacy, vocabulary and expression, and elaboration, in order to decide on objectives for the teaching programme. We require them to build up individual pupil profiles, and class profiles for all four skills. The only difference for speaking skills is that this cannot be done in one teaching session, but is compiled over one to two weeks as different pupils take turns to present to their groups or to the class, or conference with

the teacher.

TEACHING MODELS

Brooks and Friedrich suggest a process model for teaching speech, and the well-researched principles of process writing (Graves 1983) could provide a basis for such strategies as choosing topics, modelling and input, thinking and organizing discourse, drafts(rehearsals), peer evaluation and response, final draft publishing (presentation). This type of approach provides for the two major components of communicative competence, accuracy and fluency.

If we transfer this concept into a teaching unit for language teaching in the secondary school, a typical unit may have as its outcome an oral presentation rather than a written product.

The other major model is a task-based, functional integrated approach which both Prabhu and Candlin in their most recently published work are advocating as the most effective because of the interactive, differentiated, co-operative and global nature of the skills fostered by a task-based curriculum. Candlin criticizes the traditional curriculum as consisting of 'yoked components, pre-determined , decided on behalf of pupils and teachers, with fixed procedures, unexplained and opaque processes with the materials consisting of railways not maps.' Certainly, student teachers need to learn diagnosis, individualisation, how to set up effective group interactions, and devise authentic tasks which involve group decision making and negotiation if they are to develop the real skills of oracy

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in their pupils, and none of this can be achieved without developing evaluation skills, including formative evaluation techniques in both teachers and pupils.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation includes all teaching/learning routines which involve reflection, feedback, diagnosis of learning problems, or clarification of difficulties, 'which guide the specifics of instruction' and shape progress towards the goals' (Glaser 1985).

Two powerful elements in improving pupil self evaluation and peer evaluation are :

1 Use of contexts where pupils take adult roles and are responsible for their own products. The use of the elements of drama, and educational drama techniques have been proven to stimulate a flow of pupil generated language, and by 'placing the mantle of the expert' (Heathcote, 1984) on pupils, commit them to taking responsibility for, and evaluating their own products.

2 Building into lesson planning provision for pupil awareness and evaluation of their own performance and understanding before and after each task through commentary, tracing of their thinking processes, and reflection on their own and others' performances.

Self and peer evaluation of speech involves awareness raising about points of grammar, pronunciation, intonation, pace, voice or any other prosodic feature. So far as these surface features are concerned, it is important to focus on them to raise competency to the standard required for the target discourse.

Competency building or teaching of enabling skills to the

point of mastery and thorough understanding, consists basically of three stages in the competency building or ACC formula devised for the course by our coordinator Miss Rita Skuja.

Awareness raising involves providing models or eliciting examples of the target discourse from the pupils, then focussing attention on the features aimed at for the lesson. This can be anything from improved eye contact to shortened verb forms. The main point is that the teacher evaluates the pupils' ability to recognise or reproduce the feature aimed at.

Few fully developed courses for spoken English exist in general education, but the Trinity College Examinations in spoken English provide a list of graded oral structures, which we use as a basis for training students in planning possible contexts for eliciting and using oral language. These structures are not taught in listed order, but as the need arises in teaching the salient features of the target discourse.

One of the problems in focussing on oral language is the transitory and discursive nature of oral language. This can only be overcome by the use of oral composition/dictation, sound or video recording. So that features of the discourse can be paused, played back, underlined or repeated.

The second stage of the formative process is clarification. The teacher devises some practice exercises which are monitored by both teachers and peers, so that points of confusion or difficulty can be dealt with. e.g. making lists of shortened verb forms, then writing out the full form, and being prepared to explain the rationale for the apostrophe.

The third stage, or competence stage involves providing

guided practice which will lead the pupils from conscious drills to automaticity in correct use of the targetted feature or structure. Again, an evaluation sheet is a crucial tool to guide pupils in focusing and evaluating their practice, and in helping the teacher to monitor the class. Often groups can be encouraged to choose their best representative to compete in competency against other groups, and peer adjudicators can be appointed to comment on performance.

Teaching units in textbooks frequently have to be adapted in order to provide more focussed practice to achieve the objectives chosen. This is necessary because textbooks on the whole do not provide for much oral work beyond some pronunciation practice,or pre-writing discussion. Most of the exercises are written , and confined to sentence level gap-filling for reinforcement of surface structures they would need in order to accomplish the tasks chosen.

TEACHER/PUPIL EVALUATION OF METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Formative evaluation can be greatly improved if feedback and reflection on the learning/teaching process takes place. To illustrate this, during an evaluation study, data was collected from student teachers experienced teachers, and pupils concerning the methods and strategies used in Singapore classrooms to improve speaking skills. Some interesting findings emerged from this study. The activity universally endorsed by both teachers and pupils as helpful and effective in improving speaking skills was group discussion, followed by conversation practice in pairs. Pupils found reading aloud more useful than their teachers

believed it to be, and experienced teachers and their pupils had considerably more faith in pronunciation drills than did the student teachers.

The preference for group discussion supports the view put forward by Gillian Brown (1982), that exploratory talk is of great importance in developing pupils' ability to manipulate and organise ideas and language, so that fluency in thinking about and expressing ideas can be developed in a non-threatening situation. Such discussions need to be carefully structured by teachers so that participation, interaction and involvement by all group members is maximised. The Foll project material provides some ways in which this can be done, by means of group procedures and rating sheets to raise awareness of the crucial factors.

Methods of fostering pronunciation skills and reading aloud more effectively than random correction, and read-round-the-class-while-teacher-corrects are being advocated, based also on some of the material from both the Foll project and this evaluation study. Certainly, pronunciation needs at least as much attention as spelling and is an essential aspect of vocabulary learning among second language learners, since they are unlikely to pick up this skill at home or in their communities.

The suggestions from pupils about how they could best overcome their difficulties in speaking English were of great interest. They were very much aware of the need for more opportunities to practise their spoken English, and research has shown that regular daily time practising any particular language skill is of crucial importance in developing competence. Both

teachers and pupils agreed that time spent in reading and listening to spoken English were significantly helpful. Pupils matched their teachers in advocating a range of language teaching methods which they subscribed to as efficacious, such as simulations and role-play, discussion on pronunciation and vocabulary, syllabification, use of dictionaries, watching English movies and TV, reading aloud in front of a mirror, practising weak points, not being shy, and encouraging others to speak English. In all, a most concerned and thoughtful range of responses most earnestly offered, which showed that pupils are actively thinking about their own learning. Teachers could capitalise on this by taking up suggestions offered by their pupils and incorporating them into the language programme so that it becomes to some extent a joint enterprise. This is particularly important at secondary level where pupils must move towards taking resposiblity for their own learning if they are to be successful. Jack Richards suggests that data about learning strategies can be used to develop more effective teaching, and help learners to be more aware of how to improve their own performance.

When pupils were asked about specific lessons which they found helpful and enjoyable, they favoured communicative activities above all. Even the pronunciation drills were enjoyed most when served up as a competitive game; a procedure which sharpens evaluation and learning. Teaching programmes across the curriculum also received strong pupil support for helping spoken language. They rightly saw singing, acting plays in literature, choral speaking, Cort thinking programme, and moral education as

occasions for improving their oral abilities. This reinforces what research is showing, that a second language is best learned through immersion, and through emphasis on meaning and content, rather than concentrating on grammar. There is more likely to be genuine pupil evaluation if they are exposed to English language which is well spoken, in many different contexts. So this provides further reinforcement of the need for all teachers to have a high degree of communicative competence in English and to be aware of how to provide effective models and inputs, and of ways to encourage good pupil talk in the classroom.

So, in this study we have come full circle. The evaluation of speaking in the secondary schools is clearly linked with the evaluation and valuing of spoken language by all teachers and by the school system itself. Techniques of evaluating speaking skills in the secondary classroom are developing, but the biggest need is for administrators to acknowledge the complexity and importance of these skills both for teachers and pupils.

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